

Last chance to tell...

Title

For three years, Mark Cocker, the author and conservationist, has been working with BirdLife on a massive and remarkable initiative that documents how birds fill our lives. Called *Birds and People*, the project is building an international chorus on just why birds are so important to people, how they resonate throughout human cultures, and influence our responses to wider nature, and the environment. Mark is now calling for more stories, and the next few months will be that last chance to contribute, and get your personal experience into *Birds and People*. *Birds and People* will be a unique book for many reasons, but particularly because it contains original contributions from people around the world. Already, more than 420 people's stories are woven into Mark's authoritative text – from Paraguay to Portugal, from India to Australia, Azerbaijan to the Bahamas - more than 60 countries are represented already. Images for *Birds and People* are being gathered by the renowned bird photographer, David Tipling, who has already travelled widely seeking pictures. In these examples of his work, Red-crowned Cranes are trumpeting at dawn on Hokkaido in Japan, and the Eagle Hunters are crossing the Altai plateau in Mongolia, *en route* to the Ulgii hunters festival in October 2009. In the coming months, Mark will be working on a number of bird families, like owls, cuckoos, swifts, and woodpeckers, but also on the songbirds. In a recent, BBC Wildlife magazine article, Mark quotes from Cormac McCarthy's bleak novel of global environmental collapse, *The Road*. He recalls how one of the characters escapes the nightmarish, frozen landscape by dreaming of "softly coloured worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun." So bird song stands with the warmth of the sun, and of human love, as a fundamental source of happiness. Mark argues that bird song is a metaphor for the whole glorious life support system represented by a healthy environment – the network that nourishes both human body and soul. Within BirdLife's scientific canon, this is a well-founded claim: birds are some of the best indicators of state of our environment, perhaps the best. And in human culture birds play a similar role. Indeed, the celebrated writer Aldous Huxley argued that if we took birds out of British poetry, we would have to dispense with half the English verse ever written. And in ancient, India Sanskrit writings, a place without birds was a meal without spice.



Red-crowned Cranes (David Tipling)

Mark would like to hear your stories about birdsong. What is your favourite song? What memories does it trigger? Classic examples include the repetitive disyllable of the Common Cuckoo, the gentle hootings of Hoopoe, or the diverse drowsy cooings of doves and pigeons. In a recent letter, Easha Kapur (aged six) wrote from Manchester, and chose the hoarse oboe notes of Woodpigeons as a favourite song. Perhaps it is the lovelorn Common Nightingale, or a particular hornbill, like the melancholy cries of African Grey. Do write to Mark with stories that relate to song. Indeed, Easha's response reminds me that the list of people who have contributed includes children and adults, poets, novelists, eagle hunters, pensioners, visual artists, gardeners, and scientists. All these people represent the BirdLife Partnership's diversity too, and we really would welcome collaborations that express the global and local reach of all our networks. Literally anyone can contribute ? please, please do so Mark will complete his text by early 2012, so BirdLife is calling anyone who would like to provide a story to visit the project website: www.birdsandpeople.org, or write to Mark on: markcocker@randomhouse.co.uk Contributions can be short, typically fewer than 300 words, and the website contains more background and examples of contributions received to date. You can even write to Birds and People, Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA.